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SUBJECT: HEZB-E-ISLAMI ON VOTER REGISTRATION, IRAN CONCERNS

REF: KABUL 1812

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Classified By: Political Counselor Alan Yu for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

**¶1.** (S/NF) SUMMARY. Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan is continuing to organize a nation-wide political movement and distance itself from its origins as a mujahideen military force under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The party has organized members in half of the country's provinces, but recent financial difficulties have cut short plans for a meeting of its executive committee. A lack of funding has also slowed its youth outreach efforts aimed at dissuading young men from joining insurgent groups. The group is actively involved in voter registration programs, but continues to worry about harassment from GIRoA security and intelligence officials it believes receive Iranian and Russian backing. Iranian interference in Afghanistan, in particular, is a growing concern for the party.

HIA Supports Voter Registration, No Signs of Pashtun Disenfranchisement

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**¶2.** (C/NF) Our latest conversation (Nov. 9) with Arghandewal comes four months into his second term as Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan chairman (reftel). Party leaders are continuing to move the party's infrastructure away from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's legacy and toward a legitimate role in the country's upcoming presidential, legislative, and provincial elections.

**¶3.** (C/NF) Contrary to some reports that Pashtun disenfranchisement could lead to reduced participation in voter registration, Arghandewal has not yet seen any signs of systemic efforts to suppress Pashtun registration in the Phase 1 and 2 processes. Rather, HIA has embraced the process and recognizes the importance of registering its supporters if it hopes to become a player in future elections. Arghandewal said he is worried instability in Pashtun areas may lead to trouble for next year's presidential election, but he has committed his party's members and resources to an active participation in ongoing voter registration efforts anyway.

**¶4.** (C/NF) Arghandewal credits Kunar province's successful registration operation during Phase I to HIA's involvement and said the party is also registering supporters in Logar and Ghazni provinces. The party has advertised voter registration in its newsletter and emphasized women's registration. Arghandewal said there are fewer efforts by Hekmatyar to disrupt voter registration than in 2004, encouraging HIA supporters who might also be sympathetic to Hekmatyar's legacy to fall into line. Party leaders are also

lobbying to play a greater role in registration operations in Badghis, where HIA has criticized local Independent Election Commission officials for not trying to reach remote areas.

Party Now Organized in 17 Provinces

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¶ 15. (C/NF) With the election of a provincial party council in Baghlan last week, HIA has now organized provincial party councils in half of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. The party also recently opened offices and established councils in Badghis and Ghor and will open an office in Balkh later this month. Arghandewal contrasted the party's burgeoning organizational efforts with those of other, more personality-driven, Afghan political parties as a slower, but deeper grassroots process.

¶ 16. (C/NF) Few other political parties have shown much evidence of nationwide popular support or organization at the provincial level. We usually find many regional party offices for groups such as the United Front or Hezb-e-Wahdat to be homes of individual well-to-do supporters. Only a handful of the country's dozens of registered parties exist as anything other than a leader and collection of yes-men. HIA leaders in Kabul, however, say they are looking to delegate authority to district and provincial councils, which are responsible for raising funds and opening/operating offices. This has led to a more robust party operation, which while having no strongman to serve as a charismatic figurehead, allows the party to carry out several programs in many provinces at the same time.

Financial Issues Strain Organizational Efforts

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¶ 17. (C/NF) Of course, relying on local members to fund their own activities is not just a grassroots political strategy, but an act of necessity. Arghandewal said the party's national coffers have dried up and he is no longer able to fund the party out of his own pocket. After HIA's executive committee expanded from some 60 to more than 100 members this fall, the party had to cancel its plans for a meeting in Kabul this month because it was unable to pay for provincial representatives' travel and boarding.

¶ 18. (C/NF) HIA members told us earlier they expected to decide on their endorsement of a presidential candidate at this November gathering, but Arghandewal said this week that the lack of declared choices in the race made it easier to postpone the executive committee's meeting. While many members, including influential MPs like Mawlawi Ludin (Nangarhar, Pashtun), say they are inclined to support Karzai, Arghandewal said no decision has been made. With no major declared candidates other than Karzai and no political advantages to declaring for the president so early, HIA will hold on to its cards and wait as long as until March to advertise its endorsement, he said.

Worries About Iranian Influence and Youth Unemployment

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¶ 19. (S/NF) Arghandewal expressed concern over the efforts of Iranian government representatives to influence HIA members against the Afghan government and the international community. He said Iranian agents had approached a former mujahideen commander in Nimrooz province, offering weapons and money to the commander in exchange for the commander's commitment to oppose the government and coalition forces with some 1,000 men under his command in the province. Arghandewal said he had intervened and handed the commander a letter on HIA stationary asking Nimrooz mujahideen to remain patient and support the government's efforts.

¶ 10. (S/NF) Arghandewal said this effort to interfere in

Afghanistan's security fit a pattern of efforts by Iranian officials to turn Afghans against the Afghan and US governments. He said recent rumors that Karzai and the USG had had a falling out prompted the Iranian ambassador in Kabul to lobby Uzbek leader Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum and Hazara leader Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq to rally behind Karzai in hopes of countering what the Iranian ambassador perceived to be USG attempts to weaken Karzai. Arghandewal said Iran uses its considerable influence over Afghan media to shape public opinion and create a Persian-speaking sphere of influence in parts of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

¶11. (S/NF) HIA members have told us before of their distrust of GIRoA security agencies, which they suspect of being anti-Pashtun and influenced by Iranian and Russian intelligence agencies. Arghandewal believes Iranian-backed insurgents are targeting him and other HIA leaders. He also said insurgent groups like HIG and the Taliban are jealous of HIA's youth outreach programs and see them as a threat to their own recruitment efforts. Arghandewal said HIA has made it a priority to counter Iranian propaganda, telling its younger members that to Iran, killing a Pashtun and an American are the same thing. But it's unclear how many resources HIA has at its disposal to get this message out. Youth unemployment has left a generation of restless young men susceptible to insurgent and Iranian propaganda, but HIA has recently cut back on its outreach efforts to young people, both because of the central leadership's financial problems and because of specific threats local HIA members receive from Taliban groups.

A Populist Party With Moderating Influence

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¶12. (S/NF) Arghandewal's most recent comments to us show concern for the party's financial solvency, but also signs of its continuing modernization and moderation. Despite this promising talk from its leaders, HIA still faces a long road to overcome broader distrust, especially among northerners, given HIG's notorious history. As one of the few parties pursuing a national electoral strategy and democratizing its internal elections, HIA stands to become a major power-broker in the presidential election and win significant seats in upcoming provincial and national legislative elections. We continue to believe a handful of executive committee members, Arghandewal chief among them, are driving this move to the middle and rejection of Hekmatyar, while many lower-level supporters see a blurrier line between HIA and HIG. But although these moderates have their sights set on the future,

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they are suitably grounded in the present to deliver sober warnings on insurgent and foreign efforts to disrupt the country's reconstruction and security efforts. In particular, Arghandewal's concern over Iranian-backed media shaping public opinion against the Afghan government and coalition forces bears further consideration.

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